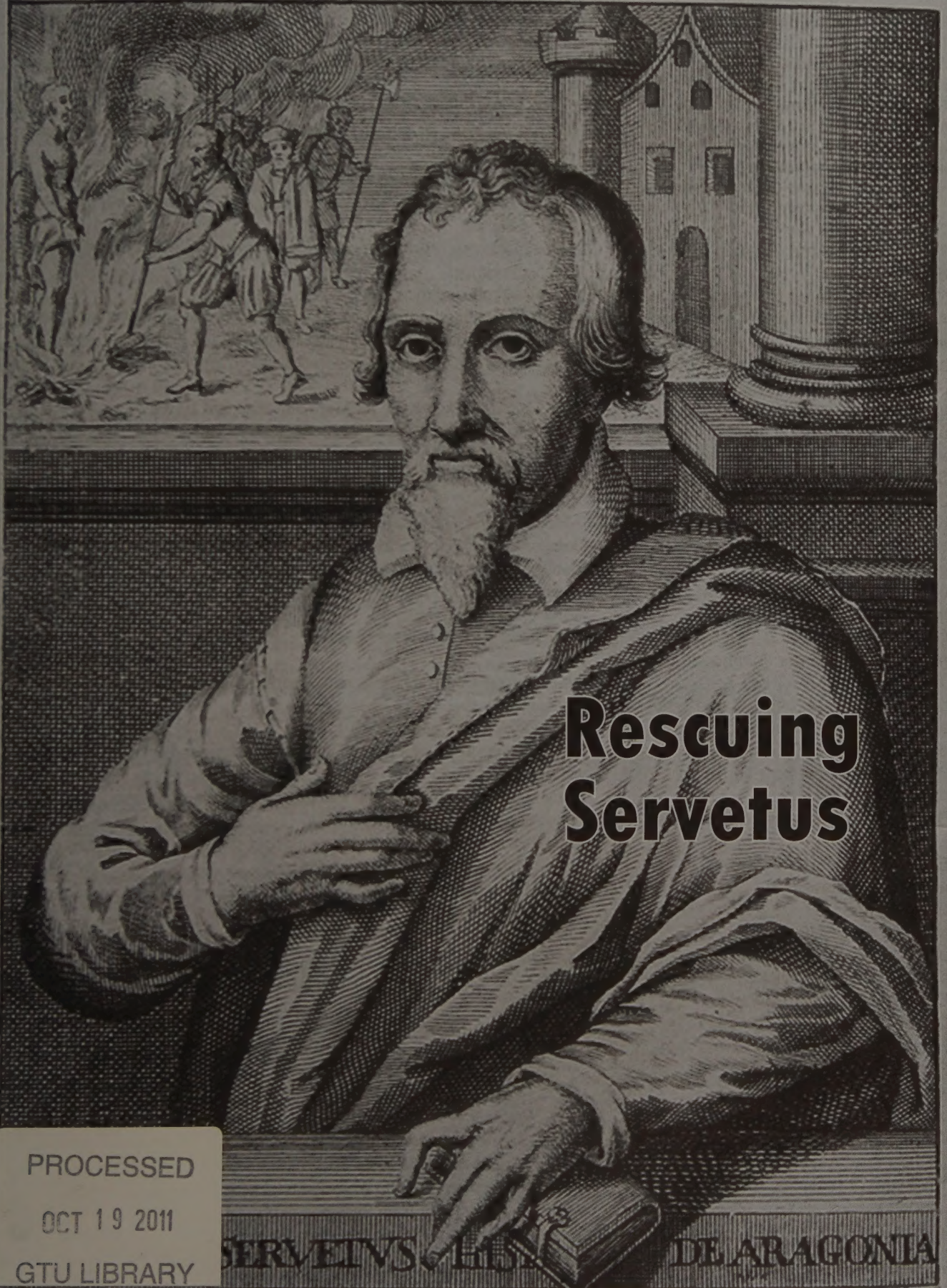


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Rescuing Servetus

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The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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Inquiring Words

On the Third Day

A Roll Call of the Fruits of the Earth

"And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the third day." – Genesis 1: 12-13

Bring Apples to the Harvest Table, and Apricots; and, with a whiff of salt-fish on a tropical

breeze, bring Ackees and Almonds.

Bring Bananas and Breadfruit, Blackberries and Blueberries, Barley and Black-eyed peas –

and, from the shrinking rainforest, bring Brazils.

Let there be Cabbage on the Harvest Table, and Currants – red, white and black; Chestnuts

for an autumn fireside, Cranberries, Carrots, Cauliflowers and Cashews. And Conkers, for

their beauty and their memories.

Bring Dill, Dates, and Damsons; Elderflower cordial and Elderberry wine; Figs, and long-forgotten Fat-hen and Feverfew.

Bring Ginger and Gooseberries, Grapes and Grapefruit, Gherkins and Gunga-peas.

Find a place for Hazelnuts; for Hops and Hips and Haws;

for I-tal Illalu and Iceberg lettuce; Jackfruit and Juniper.

Bring Kiwi fruit and Kale; Lemons, Limes, and luscious Lychees.

With thanksgiving, bring Marrows and Melons; Maize, Mint, and Mushrooms;

even Nettles, neglected and reviled but good for us and for butterflies!

Oranges and Olives, Onions and Oats all have their place, and

Plums and Plantains; Pears and Peaches; Peppers and Parsley; Potatoes and Pistachios.

Bring Quince.

Bring Raspberries and Rice, Rosemary – for remembrance – and Runner Beans.

Put Strawberries on the Table, and Starfruit; Spinach (to make us strong!), Soya and Sugar –

both -beet and -cane.

Bring Turnips and Tangerines; Thyme, Tomatoes, and even Truffles (if you can find them!).

Bring Ugli Fruit; holy Vervain and fragrant Valerian; Walnuts, Wheat, and Water-cress.

Xeranthemum, for eternity, takes its place at the table, and, for mortality, autumn leaves,

golden with Xanthophyll.

Bring Yams – and Zinnias to represent the flowers!

Let us give thanks for this Harvest Table, groaning but far from complete,

and all that God found good on the Third Day...

There are other harvests from the other Days of Creation:
hard-won harvests of the sea and of the earth's deep places,
too often squandered and misused;

and harvests with an impact on yet more living things.

Whether or not we eat meat, use wool and hides, or just eat what we grow on felled forests, drained wetlands, and ploughed prairies, none of us can stand aside and say we have no part in this.

In humility, then, in sorrow mixed with joy, we give thanks for all that we take from this good earth, And we ask for the wisdom to use it justly, wisely, and compassionately. May it be so.

– Cliff Reed

Rescuing Servetus from history

Kate McKenna traces what brought Servetus to the stake...

Michael Servetus (or Miguel Servet, or Miguel de Serveto) was born in Aragonia, on September 29th, 1511 – 500 years ago. He died only 42 years later, burned at the stake for his beliefs.

He was born into a time of great religious intolerance. It was a time of verbally and physically violent conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. It was the time of the Spanish Inquisition, of torture, execution, and the sort of fear I hope none of us here today can begin to imagine. Less than 20 years before, hundreds of thousands of Spanish Moors had been forced to leave their homes following the conquest of Granada.

Even people who had converted from Islam to Christianity to escape murder were considered unreliable, and the efforts of the Inquisition to keep them within the faith were terrifying and draconian.

When he was of an age to do so, Servetus moved to France to study law and theology. It is not clear why – perhaps he had already disagreed with the status quo in Spain. Perhaps it was in France that he began to disagree. Some facts about Servetus will never be known.

Following university, Servetus travelled widely throughout Europe. We know that by this time, Servetus was rejecting many of the widely held dogmas of the church: he believed that the single most important thing to do, to live religiously, was to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, as found in the bible. He believed having a faith and following rules was not enough, if you did not also live a good life. He disputed the concept of original sin. He felt that no one should ever be forced to accept a faith, unless they felt it in their heart. He stressed that there was free will, which meant that people could choose themselves between noble deeds or evil ones. He insisted – crucially and fatally – that Jesus was not the eternal son of God, but the son of the eternal God. It sounds such a small distinction. It really isn't.

It was a time when to reject these dogmas, or at least to reject them openly, was to run a very real risk of execution. And at first, it appears Servetus's rejection of them was silent. Eventually, however, he started to speak out. We would probably struggle to understand the risks he took when, in 1531, he published *De Trinitatis Erroribus* – On the Errors of the Trinity.

In a world which insisted, violently, that God existed in three persons, here was Servetus, saying that this was illogical. In a world in which Catholics feared and hated Protestants, and Protestants feared and hated Catholics, Servetus's views made him hated – and I suspect feared – by both. In 1538 he became the target of death threats from both sides of the Christian spectrum.

(Continued on next page)

... and asks, could you follow him there?

I have a question.

Would we – any of us – have done what Servetus did? Would we speak up for our faith to the point of death?

It's hugely unlikely we'll ever be called on to answer that question in anything other than a purely hypothetical way, and for that we should – and you know I mean this literally – thank God.

And another question. Perhaps a less personal one, but one that might bear debate at some point: *Should* we speak up for our faith to the point of death? Was Servetus right to do what he did? Or should he, in fact, have recanted? Do our mortal lives bear more, or less, value, than our spiritual lives? If our lives would be threatened because of our faith, should we deny that faith and continue to be able to live it, or should we affirm the faith and die doing it? I genuinely don't have an answer to that.

And another: how would we have reacted if we'd been around? Would we have watched Servetus's execution and then spoken out against it later? Would we have spoken up at the time, putting ourselves at risk of sharing his fate? Would we have been so blinkered by rules and dogma and societal norms that we would have assumed killing the man was the right response? Would we, and this, again, is a real question, would we have supported his execution? Would we have watched? Would we have cheered? Would we have done what Calvin did, and denounced him?

We live – and I'm not sure we take time often enough to appreciate this – in a time and place where we are free to formulate our own thoughts, discover our own creeds, live by our own faith. Not everyone, even today, does. In Iran, at the time of *The Inquirer* going to press, Youcef Nadarkhani was facing the death penalty for refusing to recant his conversion to Christianity. If we don't appeal against this, if we don't speak out against it, then we need to ask ourselves how complicit we are, and what our own faith is truly worth.

And we're not immune, you know. I'm not going to suggest that sneering at someone else's faith is anything like thinking killing them for it is the right thing to do, but if we've ever done that, if we've ever even rolled our eyes at what we think is someone else's stupid or misguided or unintelligent faith, we're not free from religious intolerance. If it's ever crossed our minds that being a Unitarian makes us better than someone who isn't a Unitarian, we're wrong – it means we found the faith which is right for us, certainly, and I hope it makes us, ourselves, better than we would be if we weren't Unitarians, but it doesn't make us

(Continued on next page)

DE TRINITA TIS ERRORIBVS, LIBER PRIMVS.



IN NOMINE CHRISTI, offendentes, quam plurimos
cerno, qui per amorem suum hominibus tribuunt, et ne
ram CHRISTVS ES obliuiscuntur penitus tradunt:
quibus ego ad memoriam, quod sit ille CHRISTVS,
reducere curabo. Ceterum, quid, quantumque sit
CHRISTVS tribuendum, iudicabit ecclesia. Tria haec i
Pronomine demonstrante hominem, quem huius homines cog
mentum appellati, concidit haec tria. Primo nesciendo, a
bit esse IESVS CHRISTVS. Secundo, hoc est trium de Ver
bi filius Dei. Tertio, hoc est Deus. loquuntur.

Servetus's 'Errors of the Trinity'

Honouring Servetus today

(Continued from previous page)

righter or cleverer or clearer thinking or more sensible than anyone else.

And it's when we start to let ourselves forget that that we start to get into trouble. We pride ourselves, as Unitarians, on our openness, on our tolerance – on our acceptance and embracing of other faiths, and of people of no faith. And so we should. But we need – if our liberal faith is worth anything – to be constantly mindful that we're not just saying the words and failing to live by them.

If we don't speak up when we hear other people spreading hatred, then we are – at best – complicit in spreading that hatred. If you don't mention your discomfort when someone tells you they mistrust Jewish people, or that Islam is a violent faith, then you are helping – in a tiny, tiny way, but helping nonetheless – the cause of religious intolerance and bigotry.

It's not easy to stand up against people though, especially when the bigotry and hatred seems so gentle and low-level. Even in the liberal society we have the good fortune to find ourselves living in, it's not always easy to stand up for what you know is right, when what you know is right isn't necessarily what's popular. It's especially hard when the people you need to stand up to are people you otherwise like and respect.

And what's really galling is that, at least half the time,

If we don't speak up when we hear other people spreading hatred, then we are – at best – complicit in spreading that hatred.

standing up against this stuff will make no difference whatsoever. You'll be passed off as a wishy-washy liberal. You'll be ignored. You may even be picked on yourself. But I'm afraid you sort of have to do it. If you don't, who will? And if no one does, how soon will it be before it starts to become openly acceptable again to hate and persecute and even kill people, for their faith? And then where would we, as Unitarians, be?

If we want to honour Michael Servetus and his sacrifice, if we truly want to remember those who suffered and died for our faith and for other faiths, speaking out is probably our best option. Sometimes you won't. Sometimes you'll be too tired or too jaded or too aware that you might not make any difference. That's okay – be kind to yourself about it. But when you do remember to do it, when you do say your piece and stand up for what you know in your heart to be right, celebrate what you did. Thank yourself for it. Be a bit smug, if you like, and know that you have made a difference in the right direction.

Kate McKenna is a member at Norwich.

Calvin went for him in the end

(Continued from previous page)

Labelled a heretic, judged as the greatest enemy of Reformation, Servetus again fled Spain and moved to Paris, to study geography, mathematics, and medicine. Indeed, in Spain, Servetus is still celebrated for his discovery of the circulation of blood around the human body. Servetus's love and reverence for science were not, for him, at odds with his religious faith. To him, the air that enters the human body was, literally, the breath of God, and he wrote "the capillary arteries expand, and draw in the air in order to aerate the soul."

Even within France, he moved several times, and changed his name to Michel Villeneuve. Fleeing and hiding were not the acts of a coward, they were the acts of a man who was, literally, in fear for his life, and who valued it. He had also realised that his death would serve no purpose to anyone.

It was around about now that Calvin was becoming prominent. Calvin and Servetus, initially, looked like becoming allies, and carried out a long correspondence. When Servetus became disillusioned with Calvin's beliefs, he published their letters.

He also published *Christianismi Restitutio*, (Restoration of Christianity), which denied the Trinity, denied predestination, and denied that the Psalms predicted the coming of Christ. This was illegal.

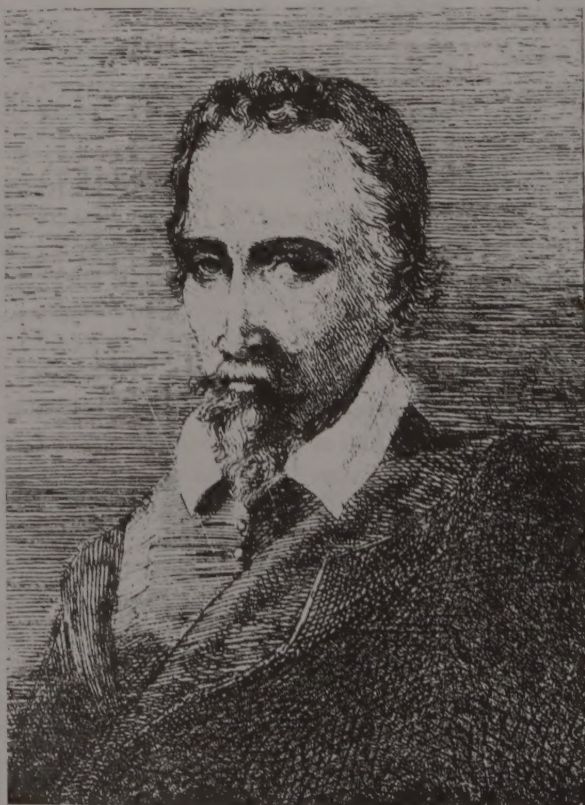
Servetus was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death as a

'Godless heretic, a promoter of fallacies, and a threat to the cleanliness and correctness of the Church.' The evidence against him included letters provided by Calvin. It was Calvin who had denounced him. Calvin was a supporter of the death penalty for heretics.

Just before his execution was due – just before – Servetus escaped from prison. He fled again, to Geneva, and was again arrested. Letters he sent from jail in Geneva testify to inhuman conditions, but at this stage he hoped for release. But he was sentenced, according to laws which were already, at that stage, nearly a thousand years old.

On 27 October 1553, Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva, along with his letters to Calvin. He was executed not by the Spanish Inquisition, as he must have expected, but by Swiss Calvinists.

It took him 30 minutes to die. He wept.



Michael Servetus

Servetus: His own words on Islam

From 'The Restoration of Christianity': An English Translation of Christianismi Restitutio, Marian Hillar, excerpted in *Servetus: Our 16th Century Contemporary*

Islam and the Trinity

But Let us listen more closely to what Mohammed says about Christ and the Christians. In the Sura of Imran, the chapter of al-Nisa and the chapter of al-Maida, and in many other Suras he says that Christ was the greatest of the prophets, the word of God, the spirit of God, the power of God, and the very soul of God, the word breathed upon by God, or by the breath of the holy spirit born of the eternal virgin... Moreover, he says that Christ's first disciples were the best and purest of men and that they wrote the truth without touching upon the concept of the Trinity. (p. 49)

He makes the same point in Sura 20 when he says that the Christians were originally a single group, but that subsequently they were divided through various controversies because they concerned themselves with several Gods. (p. 99)

In the book, *On the teaching of Mohammed*, Christ is called the word, spirit, and power of God. Mohammed called Christ Rohalla, which means, "spirit of God", since he was born from the very breath of God. Finally, although he attributes practically everything to Christ, he does not recognise that he is the son of God... Indeed, Mohammed is offended by the notion of three divine incorporeal entities or three invisible, yet equal and distinct entities that exist in one God. Because of the misguided teaching of the trinitarians, he dissented from Christianity, which was truly an unfortunate tragedy for the world. (p. 51)

New book reminds us of his modernity

Servetus

Our 16th Century Contemporary

A brief Introduction to Michael Servetus, a pioneer of religious freedom (68pp)

This slim volume manages to pack in several different perspectives on Michael Servetus, burned at the stake because he would not renounce his anti-Trinitarian views. It is thoroughly annotated, yet is readable and accessible, covering some of Servetus' history and offering applications for today. It opens with a foreword written by the Rev Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association in which he sets out the case for Unitarian reverence for Servetus. He boils down Servetus's ideas thusly: 'Nobody has all the answers, rely on your own conscience enlightened by the spirit and aspiring to a clearer vision. Hear different voices in religion in a common search for truth and meaning ... Does that sound liberal (Unitarian) to you? It does to me.'

One topic which has modern applications is Servetus's approach to Islam. In his article *Servetus and Islam: In his Life* Unitarian Universalist historian Peter Hughes says, 'Servetus could neither forget, deny nor suppress the problem posed by the continued existence of the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For him, it remained a puzzle to be solved, not by denial, denunciation or force, but by a form of integration. While many Christian apologists defended their faith by explaining what was wrong with the others' religions, Servetus chose to explore what was amiss in Christianity by finding out why Muslims and Jews could not abide it and did not willingly convert.'

Hughes applies that idea in his conclusion: 'Given Servetus's interest in Islamic and Jewish thought and his use of non-Christian scriptures and commentaries to critique Christianity, it may be that in his writings and in his stories there is a legacy

for a multi-faith modern world – a world in which the Christian, Jewish and Islamic Societies and the communities of many more faiths besides, connected by speedy transportation and communications, dwell in each others' presence and are both enriched and frightened by each other's strangeness.

'Perhaps we, like Servetus, can study the scriptures of others in order to understand our own faith and tradition better.'

The book also has quotes from Servetus's writings an imagined interview with Servetus as well as a sermon by the Rev Richard Boeke and the Worship Panel service created and largely written by the Rev Cliff Reed.

The publication was produced by the International Association for Religious Freedom and was co-edited by Richard Boeke and Patrick Wynne Jones.

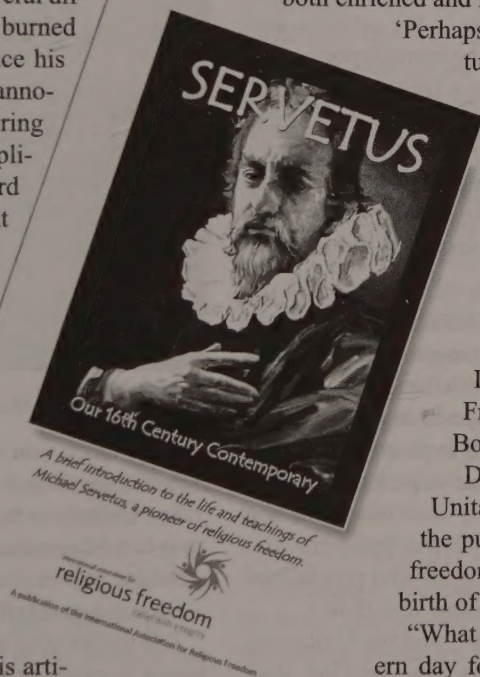
Derek McAuley, Chief Officer of the Unitarian General Assembly has welcomed the publication as a contribution to religious freedom in this the 500th anniversary of the birth of Servetus.

'What is most interesting is that, with the modern day focus on Islam and the West, the book highlights the relationship between Servetus and Islam, both in his life and his writings, during a period of religious and civil conflict in the 16th Century.

'Indeed this was a period of 'all-out global war' yet Servetus's view 'was basically tolerant of Islam, recognizing it as a legitimate, though imperfect, form of worshipping the One God' (Jaume de Marcos Andreu)''

Derek added the General Assembly is pleased to support the publication financially.

Servetus: Our 16th Century Contemporary is available from Essex Hall at £3 plus 79p postage. Call Essex Hall on 020 7240 2384 to place an order – payable by credit or debit card or send a cheque (payable to GA of Unitarian & FCC) to Audrey Longhurst, Unitarian HQ, 1 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY.



Can our faith have the power

By Tony McNeile

One of my local Unitarian chapels has a visitor pack on the table at the entrance. Anyone who comes along for the first time is given one of these to take home and peruse – or perhaps they read it during the sermon. The pack contains some recent chapel calendars which contain the phone numbers of key people in the congregation and it also contains a number of Unitarian leaflets which are printed by Unitarian headquarters in London. There are pamphlets about Unitarian weddings and Christenings, Unitarian views about Jesus and a comprehensive one called 'Introducing the Unitarians'

I read this last one with interest. It is comprehensive – and because I am already a Unitarian, I was able to see that it tries to cover every base. It says that we come out of the Christian tradition but that not everyone claims to be a Christian, that there are many spiritual paths amongst us. It also says that the heart of Unitarianism is worship which usually takes place on a Sunday. They (we) meet to worship the Divine – or a greater reality than themselves.

'What unites the Unitarians are their shared values – respect and reverence for the earth, a sense of goodwill towards the world, a belief in peace, compassion, justice and democracy.'

The Bible, it says, is seen as a record of human achievement and challenge. Jesus is a revered teacher in the rabbinic and prophetic tradition – but not a person to be worshipped.

I always think that once you are inside a Unitarian community and feel established there all this makes sense. But otherwise, to someone reading those leaflets for the first time, they must think that perhaps there is something missing. They may sit through a traditional Unitarian Sunday service with hymns and prayers and readings followed by a sermon – but then the word 'God' is never used at all.

God is an embarrassment

'God' has become a bit of an embarrassing word for Unitarians – because most people associate it with the God of the Old Testament and the Christian tradition – punishing and rewarding in a haphazard way – deeply involved in people's personal lives but also allowing them to suffer and experience terrible hardships. Many Christians also believe that Jesus was the same – changing traffic lights to green for the believers who were running late and generally favouring all who proclaimed him to be their saviour. Damnation for those who didn't.

This was the risen Jesus of the Trinity – and the Unitarians disavowed this many years ago. There is only one God, they said. We do not use Jesus as an intermediary for our prayers.

If you went to a Unitarian church 100 years ago, that would be the main difference. Prayers were directed to God alone and the sermon would be a discussion on a biblical text – trying to tease out a meaning for the people of their own time – rather than simply proclaiming it as the word of God and therefore the rule of God.

And one of the big separation points was about how faith should show itself – the Unitarians looked to the Epistle of James and said that 'Faith was justified through works'. It was what you did, *how* you cared for your fellow beings that showed your faith and justified you before God. In contrast to the Reformation belief of Martin Luther who quoted Paul's letter to the Romans – and said that 'Faith was justified through



St Paul's statue at the Vatican. Photo by AngMoKio via Wikimedia

Grace'. Once you were a believer, God accepted you – you received the Grace of God. That was all there was to it.

But Unitarians now stick to values. It is the values that unite us into a Movement. Because of our values we find ourselves amongst like-minded people when we worship and therefore we are in a comfort zone.

The leaflet talks about Religious Education. How people are happy to examine and develop their faith through programmes and meetings. They accept that they are on a spiritual journey and they are pleased to explore meanings and situations that will help them to develop and deepen their own faith.

Many others though aren't bothered about Religious Education. Many people come to church with just a vague idea about what they actually believe. They don't want it challenged. They just want to enjoy the familiarity and comfort of the community they belong to. Once I responded to one of the Unitarian online chat forums and asked a question about our worship – worship who, worship what? I asked. There was no reply.

I always say that I am not a card-carrying Christian – especially to my Christian clergy friends in Bolton. I like to think that I am aware of the goodness and the greatness in all the

and light which Paul sought?



major faiths.

Although I am not a card-carrying Christian, I have always been fascinated by Christianity. Particularly how it developed as a faith – and how bits were added and also how vital bits seemed to have fallen off over the years.

None better than Sermon on the Mount

The teachings of Jesus – especially those in the Sermon on the Mount are as good – if not better – than of any other world religion. We learn how to live properly through reading the parables and I have always been impressed that everyone in the healing miracles was treated without prejudice. The Roman Centurion, the tax collector, the poor woman, the prostitute are all treated equally. It was their needs that were attended to irrespective of who they were. If we are looking for values and a role model, all can be found in the scriptures about Jesus.

But the life of Jesus is set in a time of conflict – within a country occupied by a foreign army, within a religion that was inflexible and rule bound, within a time of agitation and change.

He had followers, disciples, and, it says, his powers of healing and preaching were passed on to them. But they were unable to continue to his high standard. They disagreed about

the purpose of their new religion – was it just for the Jews or did it include the Gentiles? There was an expectation that if a Gentile converted they would convert to become a Jew – a reformed Jew following the teaching of Jesus.

Thus there was the conflict with Paul. 'You go away and convert the Gentiles', they said to him, 'But don't bring them back here!'

Paul added something to this new Christianity that the Jewish group did not have, even though they called Jesus the Messiah and said that he had been raised up to Heaven as Elijah had been.

Paul added transcendence

Paul added a different dimension to Christianity and we first note it as he makes his defence before the Governor after the Jewish priests have called for his execution. He added transcendence: a sense of purpose in life that is above values.

Paul bypassed the inflexible rule-dominated faith of Judaism and proclaimed a new faith. In his letters you rarely find mention of what Jesus taught or about his life because he has been transferred to the Heavens and become the celestial Christ.

It feels as if Paul is talking about a new God and a new Spirit. In Paul's defence speech to the Governor Festus, two words stand out – the first is 'light' and the second is 'power'.

He says that his belief in the risen Christ has filled him with light – and it has filled him with power. This is what he preached wherever he went. The forgiveness of sins was a wiping away of the past and starting again.

He preaches that everyone can be connected to this celestial faith – it is open to all – it required no oaths, it was classless – it was open to slaves and the wealthy, it was open equally to women and men. He called it the new covenant for the world.

It is sad that Christianity, as the new religion was called, fell into a rule-dominated, male-dominated, hierarchy-dominated belief system that we see crumbling around us today.

But then I think to myself, what do people really want in the world today – in our world? What are they searching for?

They want to feel filled with light. They want to feel they have power in their lives. Not power over others but power over themselves.

We all seek a spiritual high

Sometimes, we can know all about values and try to live by them, and we can try to do good works. We can read inspirational books by modern authors, we can study ancient religions. But what is really going to make us whole is feeling totally filled with that blinding spiritual light that comes from ... well from where? Heaven? God? Christ? We don't really know, but it is a transcendent light which allows us to be able to put behind us everything in our lives that haunts us and holds us back. We want to feel we can start again and feel our lives are given power by that celestial and loving spirit that comes from ... well, where? We don't really know. But it is a transcendent power.

The spiritual journey is about reaching for that light and reaching for that power. To make ourselves feel whole.

Should we dare to say that too in our leaflets about Unitarianism and values and worship on Sundays?

The Rev Tony McNeile is minister to the National Unitarian Fellowship. See: www.nufonline.org.uk

Perhaps UUA leader needs a 'herogram'

Our spiritual sisters and brothers in the US are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the coming together of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, and all the signs are that they regard the 1961 merger as a success. In the UK we are less familiar with the Universalist side, mainly because as a denomination it was never as widespread here as it was in the US.

There are still some who rather simplistically believe that a Universalist is one who holds that all the world's religions are basically the same. The real meaning centres on the affirmation that eternal salvation through Christ is available to all, not simply the chosen few. This was heresy in its day. One element of the Universalist Church that survives independently is 'the oldest continuously published liberal religious magazine in North America', *The Universalist Herald* (www.universalist-herald.net).

The Spring 2011 issue has an article which points out that the current Pope, Benedict 16th, could fairly be called a Universalist, and this is not just because the word 'catholic' means universal. On Christmas Eve 2010 Pope Benedict gave the *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio 4, in which he proclaimed Christ as the saviour of *all* people throughout the world and throughout history. No mention of 'the chosen few' (saved) or those 'outside the church' (doomed). The Universalist stance, it seems, has at long last been vindicated.

Indeed, it is hard to find a theologian of repute prepared to stand by a firm belief that some souls will be damned for all eternity. Even Karl Barth, usually regarded as an arch-conservative, was accused of being a Universalist, a charge he never refuted. The thought that in the end everyone is saved has raised the question as to whether Adolf Hitler is in heaven. It makes an interesting discussion topic, as well as an introduction to Universalism. Then again, as Mark Twain said, "I don't like to commit myself about heaven and hell – you see, I have friends in both places."

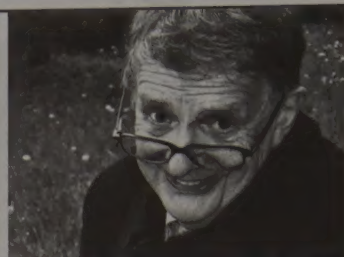


The 2011 UUA logo with two circles that represent the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America in 1961

Intriguing to learn that current UUA president, Rev. Peter Morales, was convicted in August on misdemeanor charges stemming from his nonviolent civil disobedience in Phoenix, Arizona, in July 2010. He was arrested while protesting against Arizona's anti-immigrant legislation, SB 1070: "My decision to engage in civil disobedience last July was rooted in my profound opposition to Arizona's SB 1070 and to the inhumane practices of Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio," he said. "My conviction as a result of that civil disobedience in no way alters my commitment to opposing this legislation that targets and dehumanizes some of the most vulnerable among us." I enjoyed a friendly chat with Peter at an international Ministers' conference in Holland, just a couple of weeks before his protest. I'm no expert but he didn't have the look of

Funny Old World

By
John Midgley



a criminal protestor to me. Perhaps that's why he got to serve only one day in jail.

Have we ever had a GA President in jail? Anybody seen Ann Peart lately?

* * * *

The word 'herogram' is new to me. It is a letter telling you what a great job you have done. Following the uproar about phone hacking and the demise of the *News of the World* (no great loss, say I) the *Guardian* has been on the receiving end of plaudits for its excellent journalism in exposing the outrage. A few of these were published, but, "The letters page was dominated by a flood of letters commenting on and arguing about the many issues raised by the developing scandal ... but we kept the herograms for internal consumption (sticking them on the office wall) in line with the reticence of our Unitarian founders, who would undoubtedly have frowned at such frivolous excesses," says *Guardian* letters editor Nigel Willmott. So, our Unitarian forbears are remembered for their reticence regarding their virtues. Are we still? I do my best.

* * * *

A brief holiday in Normandy was most enjoyable, giving us a taste of real summer weather. An unexpected treat was watching people dancing in the street, something I always enjoy and find somehow reassuring. Some Unitarians will be familiar with the prayer that includes, 'May the skies be clear, and may the streets be safe...' Safe enough in Rouen, it seems, for salsa dancing, something I had heard of but never seen before. At one point, a police car came by for a look, hovered for a while and then drifted off, the occupants presumably deciding that it was a benign, warm summer evening activity. All ages, races and levels of ability were joining in, many with serious looks on their faces (it requires some concentration) but undoubtedly having fun, and certainly not rioting.

By contrast, an experience on the journey home left me feeling troubled. The otherwise speedy and comfortable Eurostar train broke down at Calais, mercifully before we had entered the Chunnel. Everybody out, on to the platform for a two-hour wait, bottled water and crisps passed around to keep us a little refreshed. After a few minutes I realised that Calais station was completely caged in, with high fencing all around. There were armed soldiers pacing up and down nearby, presumably watching out for illegal immigrants. The presence of soldiers with guns always makes me feel more nervous, when their task, I suppose, is to make me feel secure. I feel the same about armed policemen, as I come from a lost generation when there were none to be seen, ever. The fact that one of these soldiers was a woman made it even more troubling, though I am not sure why. It was by no means as objectionable a scenario as that faced by Peter Morales in Arizona, but I still didn't like it, though not enough to protest and be sent to jail, not even for one day.

Learning to love Williams in a weekend

By Diana Simmons

The Unitarian Music Society's (UMS) annual conference this year was held at the Ammerdown Centre, near Bath, from 25-28 August. Ammerdown Park is the beautiful country estate owned by the Jolliffe family from the 18th century, and the centre is used mainly for retreats with weekend courses of a spiritual nature.

This was my first visit to Ammerdown, and my first attendance at a UMS annual conference. I had been looking forward to it, having greatly enjoyed my first UMS music event at the Unitarian Nightingale Conference Centre at Great Hucklow in February. I knew that I would be welcomed by a friendly group of music-lovers and that there would be a full programme of interesting activities.

Upon arrival, my first task was to unpack and explore my surroundings. My en-suite room was spacious and comfortable, with a lovely view of the courtyard garden from the window. I was struck by the peaceful atmosphere which I felt everywhere I went, even when dozens of us were chatting over tea or coffee.

After dinner (the first of many delicious meals) we were formally welcomed and we had our first rehearsal of Vaughan Williams' *Serenade to Music*, which was to be performed on the last evening of the conference, and which involved singers and musicians. For those of us who were unfamiliar with this work there was an initial feeling of dismay, and mutterings that we would never manage to learn such difficult music in such a short time! David Dawson, however, encouraged our efforts throughout the rehearsals.

Richard Merritt gave us a talk on *Serenade to Music* which I found helped me to begin to understand and become familiar with the work. We also had an opportunity to see a DVD of the life of Vaughan Williams which was a good way to get to know more about the great composer. I wasn't the only one who became a fan of Vaughan Williams after watching it.

Apart from rehearsal for the *Serenade to Music* and small choir rehearsals of other concert items, there were many optional workshops which we could attend. Lyanne Mitchell had us singing some lovely lesser-known songs by 'Rabbie' Burns; it was great fun trying to pronounce some of the dialect words correctly.

Other workshops included a talk by Nick Morrice on the musical settings of the poems of AE Housman, beautifully presented with illustrations of scenes of the Shropshire countryside. We were told that there are over 600 musical settings of *A Shropshire Lad*, worldwide. Housman insisted that the price of the published poems be low



Madrigals in the courtyard consisting of Liz Hills, Richard and Helen Merritt, Margaret Lord and Nick Morrice

so that all could afford to buy them. And he never took royalties from the sale of his poems.

Penny Johnson hosted Desert Island Discs with contributors playing CDs of their favourite music and talking briefly about why they had chosen it. The music was beautiful and the personal anecdotes were interesting to hear. During the day there were also opportunities for walks in the grounds and local area, swimming in the outdoor pool and private rehearsals.

The AGM and future planning session took place on the penultimate day. There was discussion about how we could enable members from far away to attend UMS events. It was suggested that we consider holding conferences in other centres from time to time, and offer to subsidise travel in some cases. We could only fund subsidies if we generate more income – we should like more people to join UMS and participate in our very enjoyable events.

We had two concerts in the evening, the first of which comprised individual and group 'party pieces' sung, played and spoken. The contributions from our members, including those of our very talented young members, were of a very high standard and very entertaining. In the second concert there was the successful performance of *Serenade to Music* and some more serious sung and played concert items. The evening concluded with the Epilogue in the chapel, a lovely way to end the day. After that we had singing and a musical quiz in the bar – optional of course, but I think most of us were there!

The conference concluded with a lovely Act of Worship in

the chapel. I was sad to be leaving my friends and returning to the outside world.

I enjoyed every moment of the conference and am greatly looking forward to next year's conference at Great Hucklow, 31st August – 3rd September.

*Diana Simmons
attends New
Chapel, Denton.*



Members of the Unitarian Music Society (UMS) had a successful conference. Photos by Sue Teagle

Letters to the Editor

Following Jesus is not the problem: Christianity is

So the Rev Victoria Weinstein advocates following Jesus, (*Inquirer*, 1 October) that is absolutely fine! Jesus is 'the perfect role model'.

However following the manic theology of Augustine is riddled with heretical pitfalls. Augustine's first heresy is the doctrine of 'The Fall'. This inaccurate interpretation has been used to oppress every generation west of Athens since his time – with dire consequences.

His second heresy is the doctrine of the 'Trinity'. Jim Corrigan relates that the Rev Weinstein embraced the Trinity and encountered a relational God. This is right. The Trinity is an illustration of the God-Human-Spirit relationship, an explanation of how we relate to everything. However the Trinity is not GOD it is only an illustration. To define the indefinable is a deception liberal theologians should avoid.

I agree that Unitarians should avoid cutting themselves off from other Christians by arrogance generated by a belief in their own intellectual uniqueness. However they have a responsibility to promulgate the truth they see and many 'other Christians' are blinded by the heretical 'web of lies' that has inadvertently developed since Augustine.

Unitarians should invite those liberal thinkers in the other churches to join us.

The Rev John Smith Wilkinson

Stonehouse, Gloucestershire
Cotswold Group/ Cirencester

More to the story of (Reformed) Unitarian

To the Editor:

As a Bible Unitarian of nearly 34 years' untiring allegiance to our sacred movement and specialising in the exacting problems of congregational survival, I am saddened that one of our ministers, the Rev John Midgley, can obliquely disparage a deceased one-time Unitarian layperson (the late Mr Roger Charles Gleaves, of Tottenham, North London) by using a 1970's media epithet for him – 'the self-styled Bishop of Medway' and not use his true identity. (*Inquirer*, 23 July).

I can categorically state – as an informed

bystander – that the late Mr Gleaves initially encountered Unitarian thought and practice in the early 1970's through reading NUF publications loaned to him by two close Unitarian contacts of that time. This was before his HMP Wandsworth detention.

It would be inappropriate for me to write about the short-lived proposal circa early 1990 in the London area by around one dozen adults to found and settle an alternative Unitarian worshipping fraternal. Suffice to say, the idea was summarily met with obstruction and alienation of those involved. One wondered at the time what worth some Unitarians really did place upon tolerance. Mr Gleaves did not act alone.

However, as to the Rev Midgley's voiced hesitation with respect, to possible latent dialogue between Unitarians and the present-day Liberal Catholics, this is qualifiable, and I had over a decade's first-hand experience of living within half-a-mile of such a congregation and observing the types of person who visited from quite considerable distances to take part in the various services and ceremonies.

As a broad generalisation, in responsible trustee stewardship the recent past history (say 25 years) of any prospective sharing body needs to be discreetly appraised but particularly where restructuring measures featuring a change of outward identity have occurred. With few exceptions, our own congregations now, have to grapple with vulnerability issues let alone fearfully insurmountable problems stemming from unwise ecumenical commitments.

David EE Gillman
Leicester

Inquirer discussion group reports back

Oldham Unitarian Chapel's discussion/reading group has been meeting regularly since the spring and in its September meeting continued on the same theme of using *The Inquirer* as its source material. The *Inquirers* of 3 and 17 September were considered. In the time we had, approximately two hours, we decided to concentrate on one article – the Rev Linda Hart's "God is Present in the Book of Ruth".

The story of Ruth and Naomi is retold in a fresh and almost chatty manner. Everyone in the group had first met this story at school where the main emphasis was on friendship and loyalty. This time the emphasis was on primitive ideas of social justice, sacred duties, near-starvation and rules of conduct which enabled the tribe to survive, moulding it together and preserving its identity as a group. Some of their laws and customs now seem to us to be primitive or just plain wrong, but all civilizations with their varied practices, religious and secular, are heavily overprinted by their prevailing culture.

Chiefly the role of women, the main topic, was at the lowest point in society. They were more or less slaves or so it seems to us in the 21st Century.

However, this agricultural society held together and survived as an entity. One of the story's main aims seems to be the provision of a family tree to give credence to the relationship of Jesse and David. One wonders what future generations will think of our social structures and their working.

Thanks to the Rev Linda Hart for "getting us going". I would also like to mention the article by George King of Manchester (*Inquirer*, 3 September) on the riots that took place there. Excellent for aged 15!

Dorothy Archer

Oldham Unitarian Chapel and NUF

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com

Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes.

Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.

Haughland House celebrates five years

By Noel Cochrane

A reflection on time spent at Haughland House, 'finding a place for prayer'.

Prayer is whatever calls us to detach from our own self, from our own compulsions and additions, from our own ego from our own 'place'. We are all too trapped in our own places by virtue of the egocentricity of the human person. In prayer the Spirit entices us outside of our narrow comfort zone. No wonder we avoid prayer: We have to change places.

— Richard Rohr, Radical Grace Daily meditations

Earlier this year, Anne and I knew that we needed a change of place. Our change of place was from our home in Edinburgh to Haughland House Retreat Centre in Orkney. Haughland House is a Unitarian Retreat Centre run with love by Lesley Mckeown but supported by husband Bill who prefers to remain in the background.

Previously we had visited Haughland House to attend a retreat themed around the works of John O'Donoghue. We were introduced to Haughland House by Liz who attends St Mark's Unitarian Church in Edinburgh. John O'Donoghue a former Catholic priest provided common ground. The retreat proved a change from the familiar pattern of Catholic retreats with which we are familiar.

On our return visit there were no other guests and we did our own thing. The centre is small but comfortable and we had the largest of the three bedrooms. Lesley provided the food and we prepared our own meals except for the evening meal which Lesley prepared and shared with us. Lesley took great care in supplying appropriate food for Anne's non-dairy dietary requirements but in addition we enjoyed the quality of Lesley's supplementary supplies such as home-made bread, marmalade, scones and oatcakes. We were truly spoiled.

That week in May was particularly stormy; ensuring that at least one full day was spent entirely indoors. This proved a luxury; again it is such a welcome change to experience the primitive delights of a generously filled open fire. Although we had brought reading material with us we found more interesting reading on Lesley's well stocked book shelves.

Not only did I find great pleasure in re-reading poems and short stories by the Orkney writer George Mackay Brown – but Lesley also had a DVD and CD of the writer. When the weather improved we walked through fields to cliff tops and down to the shore line watching seals and sea birds in abundance. At the village we visited the Heritage Centre and café and then on to visit the Pottery.

David Holmes is a potter and David was at his wheel when we visited his workshop. We were quick to take up his invitation to have a tour of his studio situated in the historical mill of Elwick which David is restoring back to a working mill. It was also fascinating to see the pit where he digs his clay from.

Other highlights of our visit included taking part in a group meditation which Lesley runs on Mondays in Kirkwall Library. Anne also attended an art class on Shapinsay in the home of a local artist Pat Hazzledine. Afterwards there was a community lunch back at Haughland House. I would be hesitant about recommending Haughland House too highly just in case too many people discover the delights of this perfect place for a change.

Noel Cochrane is from Edinburgh.



Encouraging people to sing 'Happy Birthday Haughland House' as Lesley Mckeown cut the cake on the occasion of our celebrations on September 11. Haughland House was officially opened in March 2006 by the Rev Brian Cockcroft. A wonderful five years have passed all too quickly until we realised we couldn't let the year pass without a celebration tea party. There was live music from the builders, party games and party pieces a joyous occasion. Our new programme is now on the website with some exciting new initiatives www.orkneyretreat.org.uk

I realise as the years pass that there is a continuous evolving process where we have to be prepared to change and adjust our programme to suit the needs of the community we serve, in order to survive and to be of value. Next year should see the results of this. I have felt overwhelmingly this year that Haughland House is a well loved place, attracting new people, and offers something vital to folks' sense of security and wellbeing that is needed in these worrying times.

— Lesley Mckeown is trustee and custodian of Haughland House at Shapinsay, on the Orkney Isles



Friends of Haughland House enjoyed the birthday celebration.

News in brief

Update on Oldham campaign



The Oldham Unitarian Chapel campaign on behalf of Taha Ghasemi and Abdoulaye Diabate, who are seeking asylum in the UK, is gathering momentum. We have been able to raise finances for legal advice including donations from generous individuals.

In September, an excellent 'Curry Night' (thanks particularly to the culinary efforts of the exiled journalist and NUJ member Mansoor Hassan and his wife Aquila) was held at Oldham Unitarian Chapel where £420 was raised.

On Monday September 5th, Taha Ghasemi and Abdoulaye Diabate had their first meetings with immigration solicitors at the offices of Latitude Law (photo below). They were accompanied by Ian Tilton and the Rev Bob Pounder. Bob, minister of Oldham Unitarian Chapel, said, 'We are waiting for the written legal assessments of both cases. The advice we have received so far is favourable.'

— The Rev Bob Pounder



Model Railways at Padiham chapel

Nazareth Unitarian Chapel Padiham is planning a Large Model Railway Exhibition from 10 am to 4 pm on 5 November. This now-annual exhibition will be bigger than last year, in that all three schoolrooms will be in use.

The Hameldon Room will have a full display of 'G' Gauge and a display of Stobart material. There will again be a 16mm which will be powered by lead acid batteries, and a 00 large model tramway layout. The highlight will be the ever growing Gauge 1 society with their live steam engines, radio controlled, plus many others. Homemade refreshments available all day. Admission £3 children £1.50. For further details, contact Barry Brown on 01282 773336. All are welcome.

— Barry Brown

John Readett plays York Concert

On Friday, 28 October, Folk musician John Readett from Leigh in Lancashire will perform for the first time at York's Unitarian Chapel at St Saviourgate. As usual, the concert takes place at 12.30pm, with ticket and programme at the door (£5/£3), and lasts up to one hour.

A BBC radio broadcast-artiste, John's musical credentials include working with top names such as Martin Carthy, Mike Harding, and the Houghton Weavers. A veteran of folk festivals, he has been involved with the running of folk song and music clubs in Lancashire for many years, where his current bands are Turnpike, and Palatine Folk.

Myrna Michell, organiser of the Last Fridays concert series, says, 'John's voice is exceptional in its warmth and character, and he also plays acoustic guitar, mandolin, bouzouki, bodhran and harmonica. Do join us for this special event.'

'Last Fridays' is a series of refreshing monthly lunchtime concerts in the fine acoustics of St. Saviourgate Unitarian Chapel, York. The Grade II* listed chapel, opened in 1693, is a short walk from Colliergate, along St. Saviourgate towards Spenn Lane. The ground floor of the chapel is fully accessible.

For more about the chapel or York Unitarians, visit www.ukunitarians.org.uk/york

— Janet Eldred

Welsh congregations celebrate Harvest

On Sunday 18 September, the new Cardiff Unitarians Chairperson, Gwynn Prichard, welcomed Aberdare and Cefn Coed Unitarians to a joint service held at the Friend's Meeting House in Cardiff. Nearly 50 people were present including a goodly representation from the Cardiff Sunday Club which has recently been formed. The age range at the service was remarkable, from 6 months to 92 years!

The service took the form of a Harvest Thanksgiving and included a reading by Caroline Boyce on 'Harvest Home'. The children had their own section which started with a parade of the new banner that they had made. During this section, a bouquet was presented, by the children, to Ivy Thomas who had recently celebrated her 90th birthday. It was also pointed out that Ann Lewis, from Cefn Coed was also celebrating her birthday that day.

The children then made a presentation to two 'new' members of the Cardiff Congregation, Ivy Thomas and Gwynn Prichard.

Following the service everyone was invited to a tea and to share in Ivy's very tasty Birthday Cake which had been made by Dianna Bianchi.

The Cardiff Sunday Club now meets monthly, on the fourth Sunday of every month at 4pm in the Quaker Meeting House, Charles Street, Cardiff.

The other Unitarian Sunday Club in South East Wales meets, for children between the ages of 3 and 11, in the schoolroom at Highland Place Church, Monk Street, Aberdare from 10am to 11am every Sunday.

Both of these Sunday Clubs are open to non-Unitarians and the contact details are: Cardiff – Sarah Boyce email: sarah.boyce1@ntlworld.com Or Highland Place, Aberdare – Joy Foster email: joy.foster@talktalk.net

— Keith Lewis-Jones